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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the comparable educational histories of the "Hispanos" of a mountainous area of New Mexico and the peoples of southern Appalachia. Presbyterian missionaries entered both regions following the Civil War and soon placed mountain people in the category of "exceptional populations," along with freed slaves, Native Americans, Mormons, and other marginal groups in American society. By 1890, there were 32 mission schools in New Mexico serving more than 1,600 Mexican-American students. A decade later in the Appalachians, there were 37 mission schools that served 3,000 mountain youths. By the early 20th century, mountain students could progress from isolated one-room elementary schools to relatively large and well-equipped boarding schools that offered secondary-level work. The goal of boarding schools was to prepare future teachers for the advent of public school systems. As the latter expectation became fulfilled, Presbyterians gradually discontinued their day schools. The boarding schools, however, remained vital through the 1930s. Throughout the years many teachers left, but for those who remained, classroom duties made up only a small part of their daily routine. They performed an array of medical duties; offered advice about housekeeping, farming, and legal affairs; and served as midwives and undertakers. These efforts bridged cultural barriers, countered local suspicions, and perhaps most importantly, eroded the missionaries' own prejudices and ethnocentrism. Although the missionaries accomplished a great deal by offering education, there is evidence that their influence eroded traditional culture in both regions. (LP)

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MISSIONARIES AND MOUNTAIN PEOPLES: PRESBYTERIAN RESPONSES TO SOUTHERN APPALACHIA & HISPANIC NEW MEXICO

by Mark T. Banker

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MISSIONARIES AND MOUNTAIN PEOPLES...

Around the turn of the 20th century, a missionary reported to the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. that she was encouraging the people of her isolated mission station to beautify their homes. She contrasted the humble native homesteads with the natural grandeur of the surrounding mountains and observed that only "lack of knowledge and enterprize" kept the local peoples impoverished. "[They] scarcely realize," she concluded, "that there is any world beyond these mountains." (Crowell 1913, 25.)

This account has a familiar ring to those acquainted with the Protestant missions that flourished a century ago in the Southern Appalachians.[1] The residences that concerned this missionary, however, were not log dwellings "way back" a lonely Appalachian hollow. They were, instead, "little adobe houses" in the shadows of the rugged Sangre de Cristos, a southern extension of the Rocky Mountain chain. Despite obvious outward differences, there are numerous parallels in the histories of the Hispano "New Mexicans" of the Sangres and the peoples of the Southern Appalachians. In particular, these two mountain peoples experienced many similar encounters with elements of the American mainstream; this essay explores one of those encounters.

Presbyterian missionaries entered the Southern Appalachians and northern New Mexico in the aftermath of the Civil War as part of a broader wave of mainstream migration into the relatively isolated mountain enclaves. Where industrialists

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found abundant raw materials to exploit, the missionaries discovered "strange and peculiar" peoples. The Presbyterian response to the Hispanos and Appalachian folk was energetic and ethnocentric. An array of pejorative adjectives such as "degraded," "benighted," and "superstitious" colored reports from both regions. Presbyterian mission officials soon placed the New Mexicans and Appalachian peoples in the category "exceptional populations," along with Freedmen, Native Americans, Mormons, and other marginal groups in American society. These were peoples, explained one churchmen, "...who are with us...but not of us."(Banker 1992, 11)[8]

The missionaries offered an array of explanations for the condition of the mountain peoples. New Mexico missionaries, for example, pointed to the "degenerate" Hispanic-Catholic legacy and the Spanish-Indian miscegenation that had fostered the New Mexican culture, and they regularly cited the Hispano's proclivities for tobacco, alcohol, card playing, dancing, and other forms of merrymaking. (Banker 1992, 26-35) In a similar fashion, missionaries in the Appalachians pointed to the southern mountaineers' lack of ambition and neglect of public responsibilty. They went to great lengths to explain, in particular, how an Anglo-Saxon people had degenerated to such a level; one observer, for example, pointed to "the disgusting snuff-dipping practices of the mountain women" as a major cause for the region's unfortunate condition. (Banker 1984, 3)

Missionaries from both regions agreed that above all else isolation and ignorance had created the poverty and degradation they encountered. This, of course, meant that the situation for neither group was permanent nor hopeless. The missionaries' own presence was evidence that longstanding isolation was already diminishing. Moreover, New Mexico missionaries repeatedly emphasized that the Hispanos had "great inate intelligence" and were "looking for something better, while their Appalachian counterparts observed that the southern mountaineers were of "good Scotch-Irish stock" and had contributed much to the nation during the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Surely such peoples deserved a helping hand.(Banker 1992, 35; Banker 1984, 3)

A conviction that they had a panacea to cure the ills of the mountain peoples buoyed Presbyterian optimism. Mindful of their Calvinist heritage and of the absense of public education in both New Mexico and Appalachia, Presbyterian missionaries instinctively turned to mission schools to reach and regenerate the New Mexicans and southern mountaineers. In the words of one pioneer New Mexico missionary: "one might as well come here and go to sleep as to try to work without a school."(Banker 1992, 64)

Cautious mission officials were less enthusiastic about this unprecedented (and relatively expensive) experiment; consequently the mission school endeavor began sporadically. Teachers arrived in isolated mission stations with meager knowledge of the peoples they came to serve and with vague

directions about their duties. They lived and conducted school in crumbling adobe huts and log cabins with dirt floors, leaky roofs, and crude furnishings. Teachers from both fields pleaded frantically for blackboards, textbooks, maps, globes, chalk and other supplies. Because few schools existed in the mountain regions, the earliest schools taught an array of students of "all sizes and ages." A New Mexico teacher had students of such varied abilities that she was "compelled to hear 64 lessons per day." (Banker 1992, 99-111)

In time the mission school became the centerpiece in the Presbyterian crusade to uplift the mountain peoples thanks to generous, energetic, and skillful support from Presbyterian women. In New Mexico, 32 schools were in operation in 1890 serving more than 1,600 Hispano students. A decade later in the Appalachians, Presbyterians operated 37 schools that served nearly 3,000 mountain youths. (Annual Report..., 1890, 1900) In both fields, teachers and mission officials devised "Plans of Study" and organized annual conferences where teachers shared pedagogical insights and experiences. Gradually a "system" of Presbyterian schools took shape in both regions. By the early 20th century, mountain students could progress from primary level work in isolated one-room day schools to relatively large and well-equipped boarding schools that offered secondary level work. The cluster of "Asheville Schools," for example, became the capstone of a network of schools in Western North Carolina and East Tennessee. Menaul School in Albuquerque and Allison

School in Santa Fe filled a similar role for the New Mexico field. The major purpose of the boarding schools was to produce graduates who would assume leadership roles in their home communities with special emphasis on preparing teachers for the public school systems that were soon to arrive in the mountain regions. As the latter expectation became fulfilled, Presbyterians gradually discontinued their day schools. The boarding schools, however, remained vital through the first third of the 20th century.

In both the isolated day schools and boarding schools, the mission teacher was the advance agent in the Presbyterian effort. Reflecting a national trend, the Presbyterian teacher corps was overwhelmingly female. In 1890, 90% of the 60 teachers in the New Mexico field were women, all but a few of whom were single. Most teachers came from middle-class Presbyterian homes, had some post-secondary education, and apparently yearned to assume roles normally denied them in mainstream society. (Banker 1992, 84-87) Once in the mission field, however, unantcipated hardships and failure to fulfill unrealistic expectations often proved discouraging. Numerous teachers, male and female, departed after only brief stays in the two mountain fields. (Banker 1992, 111-12)

Some teachers, however, proved more flexible and durable. One New Mexico teacher, for example, reported that to reach her people "she learned Spanish, ate beans almost exclusively, [and] lived in a little adobe house." (Banker 1992, 128) Teachers who

remained in the mountains long found that classroom duties made up only a small part of their daily routine. They performed an array of medical duties, offered advice about housekeeping, farming, legal, and personal matters, and served as midwives and undertakers. (Banker 1992, 128-29) These efforts helped missionaries bridge cultural barriers and counter local suspicion. Perhaps more importantly, close interaction and cordial relationships with the the mountain peoples eroded the missionaries' own prejudices and ethnocentrism, which often posed an even greater obstacle to their work. (Banker 1992, 129-32)

The official goal of the mission schools was nothing less than a cultural transformation of the mountain peoples. Albuquerque's Menaul School, for example, reported that its purpose was to transform "dirty, procrastinating, untrained Mexican boys...[into] tidy, dishwashing, bedmaking, care-taking, studious, Bible-loving, hymnsinging, wide-awake young men." (Banker 1992, 125) To attain such results, the schools followed rigorous daily routines. Boys at Asheville Farm School, for example, awoke at 5:45 a.m., ate breakfast at 6:15, and, by the time they gathered for supper at 5:30, each one had worked three hours and attended classes for six, including one hour of Bible study. The superintendent of nearby Asheville Normal Schools typified the missionaries serious approach with his oft-repeated (and loosely paraphrased) admonition from

Thessalonians 4:11 - "Study, be quiet, and do your own business."(Banker 1982, 12, 22)

The Presbyterians definition of education was broad. The program at Asheville Farm School, for example, was advertised as "an important three-sided work," which, one graduate explained, taught "...not only book larnin' but habits of industry [and] rigtheousness." (Banker 1984, 10) In addition to their classes, students performed work duties as part of their education and to defray expenses. At the large boarding schools in Albuquerque and Asheville, mountain boys learned about crop rotation, contour plowing, fertilizers, improved livestock, and farm machinery, even as teachers also took care to acquaint them with basic housekeeping skills. At the sister schools, missionaries taught mountain girls to cook, keep house, preserve produce, care for children, and instructed them in the social graces that prevailed in mainstream society. (Banker 1984, 11, 27-29; Banker 1992, 125-26,173)

The other vital component of mission school education was, of course, religious instruction. Early missionaries to New Mexico had quickly identified Roman Catholicism as a major cause of that territory's problems, and their counterparts in the Appalachians considered the emotional brand of Protestantism that flourished in the southern mountains only slightly less undesirable. The missionaries never required students to become Presbyterian (and, indeed, evidence from New Mexico suggests that relatively few did). (Banker 1992, 195-96) Nevertheless

mission school students could not mistake what their mentors considered the preferred approach to spiritual development. In the boarding schools, prayers and singing preceded and followed every meal; daily Bible study was required; Wednesday evenings were reserved for prayer meeting; and the Sunday routine was rigidily set to prevent even the most wayward mountain youth from violating the fourth commandment. (Banker 1984, 12; Banker 1992, 126) Some teachers recognized that "piety and religious formalism" were not sufficient. For example, a veteran Asheville Farm School teacher observed in 1925 that "[this] school would surely be a failure...if the boys did not learn to make Christ's teaching part of their daily lives."(Banker 1984, 12) The Christian Endeavor societies and Gospel Teams that went out from the schools to lead religious services and perform service projects in isolated mountain communities reflected this concern for "applied Christianity."

Finally, in their effort to produce well-rounded students, schools in both fields provided opportunities for fun and "wholesome entertainment." Dramatic productions, musical performances, and athletic competition were standard fare, and playing fields and gymnasiums were among the first improvements on each boarding school campus. Teachers encouraged students to hike, swim, and keep physically fit. When possible reciprocal visits were conducted between sister schools to allow (indeed encourage) suitable male and female interaction. ((Banker 1984, 14, 32-34; Banker 1992, 173-74) Citing "the decay of the

American family," the home missions board shortly after World War I directed the schools to devise courses to teach "worthy ideals of personal and family life." A long-time teacher at Asheville Normal School became one of the board's experts in this field, and in the 1920s she carried her message "about the mysteries of life and motherhood" to other Presbyterian schools for girls, including those in New Mexico. (Banker 1992, 174)

Gradually as the twentieth century progressed, the circumstances that led Presbyterians to establish their network of schools in Appalachia and northern New Mexico diminished and other concerns placed demands on Presbyterian attention and mission dollars. By the 1920s the missions board closed most of the day schools, in some cases turning their facilities over to local communities to serve as community centers or medical stations. During the Depression, strained state budgets and continued absence of quality secondary schools convinced Presbyterians to continue operation of several of the large boarding schools. But financial and philsophical considerations led the mission board to consolidate and make co-educational the boarding schools that remained. Finally by the end of World War II, new public schools appeared in even the most remote mountain areas and buses on new highways carried students to them. Eventually the few remaining day schools were closed, and the large boarding school campus in Albuquerque and of the former Asheville Farm School were turned over to private boards of trustees to become today's Menaul School and Warren Wilson

College. (Banker 1984, Ch. 2 & 3; Banker 1992, Ch. 8 & Epilogue) Although these two schools differ outwardly from their predecessors, concern for peoples of the surrounding mountains and the stamp of the "important three-sided work" are still evident in their distinctive programs.

Just as there were parallels in the Presbyterian perception of the two mountain peoples and their remedy for uplifting them, there are also striking similarities in the consequences of the missionary endeavors. In both fields missionaries failed to win large numbers of converts to Presbyterianism. However, perusal of lists of the careers and contributions of mission school graduates and conversations with residents of communities served by Presbyterian missions in both mountain regions leaves no doubt that Presbyterians accomplished considerable good. Less comforting, on the other hand, is evidence from New Mexico that suggests Presbyterian influence helped erode traditional ways and thus contributed to tensions and fissures in Hispano society. (Banker 1992, 200) Similar consequences no doubt also resulted in the Appalachians.

The cultural interaction that took place in the mountain missions, however, ran more than one way. The encounter with the mountain peoples also had considerable impact on the Presbyterians. Some missionaries in both fields gradually began to recognize that the hold of human culture is tenacious, that the mountain cultures had virtues that deserved to be preserved, and that the mountain peoples could make enlightened decisions

about their own best interests. Even before the turn of the century, Presbyterian reports occasionally contradicted earlier negative descriptions of the mountain peoples. The Presbytery of Santa Fe, for example, denounced as "untruthful and slanderous" an 1888 congressional report that recommended against New Mexico statehood and concluded that the native New Mexicans compared favorably with the peoples of "other territories...[and] many, if not all states." (Banker 1992, 131). Similarly an article in a major home missions publication in 1917 observed that the Appalachian peoples "possess standards we might envy" and concluded with a message that would surely have shocked Presbyterians of the previous generation. "Bring us your northern culture," a mountaineer urged Presbyterian readers, "but leave us our civilization." (Home Mission Monthly 1917) The Presbyterian sojourn in the Sangre de Cristos and Southern Appalachians, indeed, wrought signficant changes. Placed in the context of the broader patterns of mainstream America's encounter with cultural and ethnic diversity, these changes are significant.

ENDNOTES

[1] See, for example, Shapiro. Appalachia on Our Mind, Ch. 2 and Whisnant. All That is Native and Fine, Ch. 1.

[2] General overviews of Presbyterian work in the two regions are Barber and Agnew. Sowers Went Forth and H. Davis Yeuell. Moving Mountains. Two contemporary accounts from the

Presbyterian perspective are: Crowell. Our Mexican Mission Schools and Wilson. The Southern Mountaineers.

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